

Benny the Bomb Dog

Michel Dahlstrom

Benny was an explosives detection dog. He was a beautiful German shepherd with a superb nose. He was also an attack dog who thought one of the best things in life was a really long run to get to the “bad guy” and bite him during training. The tougher the fight, the more fun it was for Benny. But first and foremost, Benny was a member of the Laboratory employee family.

Benny was known all around the Laboratory during his tenure here between 1985 and 1994. He had what I called his “cookie route.” It included Health Services, the Credit Union, Classification, Travel, and Building 111, where employees kept boxes of dog cookies especially for Benny. At the Credit Union, he would go behind the counter and stand up looking out at the customers as though he were a teller. If I didn’t make regular stops at these places, I would receive a phone call asking me to drop by for a visit. Make no mistake—the visit was really with Benny; I was just along to drive him there. Employees would flag me down when we were in the patrol car and ask to visit with Benny. At Christmas, Benny received cards and presents of dog biscuits and toys from Lab employees.

One time, we had finished a vehicle search at the Superblock, and I was closing the gate. When I looked around for Benny, he was all the way across the courtyard sitting in front of a man on a bench. The man had a candy bar in his hand held halfway to his mouth. He sat there, frozen, while this huge German shepherd sat staring at him. The poor man wasn’t sure what to do. But all Benny wanted was a bite of the candy bar.

Benny had a long list of explosives detection searches that he had done for the Laboratory. He performed searches at UC Berkeley’s Greek Theater for a visit by Corazon Aquino and at Berkeley Middle School for then-Vice President Bush and Governor Deukmejian. He went to UC Santa Cruz for the Regent’s Meeting. He searched areas here at the Lab prior to

CIA Director William Casey’s visit. When a car bomb exploded in the Sandia parking lot in 1987, Benny spent almost 18 hours searching through the open areas of the Lab and responding to calls about suspicious packages. On a daily basis, Benny searched every vehicle entering the Superblock during his shift.

As a working dog, Benny was tops, but as a community relations representative, he was the best. Benny touched lives in special ways. One time we had been invited to present a canine demonstration to a fourth-grade class. After I had finished, another teacher asked me if I would bring Benny into her classroom. When I entered the classroom, I realized we were in a special-needs class. One little girl was brought over to pet Benny. The teacher put the girl’s hand on Benny and gently guided her hand to stroke him. Then she took the girl’s hand away. The little girl reached out again—on her own—to touch Benny. It was the first time this little girl had ever made a voluntary motion and reached out to anything.

Benny worked for the Lab for nine years. He retired to the house of his then-handler Officer Alan Cocilova, where he lived as a part of the family until he passed away.



Benny, shown above with his first handler Michel Dahlstrom, doubled as a community relations specialist.





The LLNL Fire Department responds to a wide variety of emergencies, both onsite and offsite.

Staying Prepared

The LLNL Fire Department is well known for fighting fires and responding to emergencies off site, more so than on site. The department assisted in the Yellowstone fire of 1988, the Oakland/Berkeley Hills fire of 1991, and recovery operations after the freeway collapse caused by the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. Indeed, retired captain John Sharry says that the biggest challenge to being an Lab firefighter is learning how to constantly be ready on site, because the Lab has a small rate of incidences. “The hard part is that things don’t happen

here very often,” Sharry says. “We don’t have fires when we’re supposed to have fires, and we don’t have that many accidents. So the challenge to the Fire Department here is to stay ready. Luckily, we provide mutual aid for the City of Livermore and Alameda County, and we run enough of these off-site calls that we keep our interest up, keep our skills up, and get the experience we need to have to fight the things that happen at the Laboratory—which are really unusual.”